

6 Wednesday, August 17, 2011

Duxbury Clipper

Duxbury woman studies in Turkey

By JUSTIN GRAEBER, CLIPPER EDITOR
JUSTIN@DUXBURYCLIPPER.COM

Turkey is a modern, secular, country where people are relatively well-educated and savvy about technology and the world. Yet, it's also a country where there are limits on women's rights, and the country's major newspaper published a story insinuating the 52 Americans living in the country on Fulbright scholarships were all CIA spies. Such is the contradiction that is Turkey, and it's where Duxbury resident Alexandra Hallowell recently spent a year teaching English at a university.

Hallowell is no stranger to Turkey. When she was in high school, her family took in a Turkish exchange student through the American Field Services program. The girl was a devout Muslim, and she came to American in 2002, not too long after 9/11.

"It was a very intense year," Hallowell said. "It got us kind of thinking more about Turkey."

The experience opened her eyes to Turkish culture as well as the world at large. She herself went to France in high school through AFS, and spend her junior year at Hobart and William Smith College in the Netherlands.

She also returned to Turkey to visit with the exchange student twice, once merely as a vacation, and once in 2008 when she was studying in the Netherlands.

During that trip, she worked with the student to interview women from a cross-section of Turkish society, from highly devout women in head scarves and long skirts to secular women in high heels and makeup.

She was interested in the perception people had of women in the country, and how they thought of themselves. Unlike men, who only identify themselves as devout Muslims if they have long beards, women can be picked out of a crowd by their traditional dress.

"The second you see a woman like that, you already think you have an idea about her," she said. Turkey, a country that Hallowell called "militantly secular," has limits on such garb despite the Muslim population — women aren't allowed to wear head scarves to work in the public sector, for example. (This is changing slightly under the country's current regime, which is the most religious administration Turks have had in years.)

"I've always been fascinated by culture and religion," Hallowell said. "It got me thinking about it, Islam in a broader sense. People are baffled by it, the complexities ... people don't understand that Islam doesn't have the structure [of Christianity]. There's different mullahs with different ideas."

The experience was inter-

esting and eye opening, but even so, Hallowell wasn't planning on returning to Turkey. She wanted to travel through the federal Fulbright grant program, but to Nepal, to study the effect of microloans to former sex workers trying to repatriate into society. However, shortly before she was scheduled to leave, there was a Maoist rebellion in the country, and Fulbright shut down their programs in that country. That left Hallowell with only two weeks to pick a new program. So she wound up in a program at Namik Kemal University in the town of Tekirdag. (In another illustration of Turkey's contradictory nature, the school is named after a famous national poet — but its focus is technology.)

Hallowell was in charge of putting together an English curriculum for students at the university, who were required to take a year of English before they could move on to their particular field. Many of the students at Namik Kemal come from more rural communities and have rudimentary English skills. However, Turkey's economy is growing, and young men and women know they are more employable if they can speak the language of international business.

"In terms of business, they're booming," Hallowell said. "They didn't even have slowed growth when we were going through a recession."

At the university, Hallowell taught 40 classroom hours a week, and around 500 students total. On some days she had seven hours of class in a row.

"That was really exhausting," she said.

Mostly she taught English language, although she did occasionally guest lecture in the higher level English classes.

"They don't really have a lot of debate in classes," she said of Turkish education. "I was the fun teacher, because I was the game maker."

Hallowell said that she'd love to return to Turkey and continue working there, although she doesn't think she could live there permanently. Her feelings about the country are conflicted, just like Turkey itself.

"They're not Iran, they're not throwing burkas over the ladies and keeping them from driving," she said. Yet there are still many restrictions on what women can do, there is rampant censorship and institutional homophobia. Hallowell said there is a law in Turkey that allows the government to listen in to all foreigner's phone calls.

"I had some friends whose lives turned to hell after [the CIA episode]," she said.

Despite its drawbacks, Hallowell feels Turkey is an important country on the world stage.

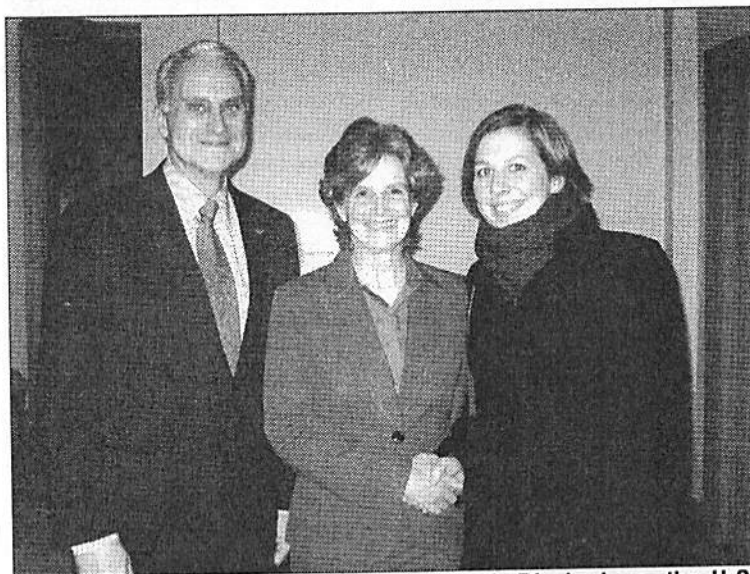
"Turkey's becoming more and more important in terms of international policies," she said.

In fact, she recommends visiting the country, saying it's a place that is safe but is still challenging and exciting for tourists.

"I think it's a great place to shake it up," she said.



Hallowell with her students on her last day of teaching at Namik Kemal. The students' t-shirts have her picture printed on the front.



Hallowell (at right) pictured with Francis J. Ricciardone, the U.S. ambassador to Turkey, and his wife at his residence in Ankara.